

Interview with Ivan Selin

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

UNDER SECRETARY IVAN SELIN

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Q: Mr. Under Secretary, you had some acquaintance with the Department of State when you were appointed in 1989. What did you expect to find?

SELIN: I found pretty much what I expected. I had had a lot of experience with State, having been in the national security establishment since 1965. My company had done some work with State, consulting on systems work. I had worked personally on a numbers of projects at State. I knew the personnel area fairly well; I had some knowledge of the Foreign Service; I had some idea of the state of the Department's financial management and information systems.

I did find myself charged with the responsibility for refugee programs, which was a brand new field for me. Therefore, the only two areas that were big surprises to me when I came on board was the Refugee Program, because I had never thought about it, and Consular Affairs, which was much different from what I had envisaged. I knew that the Department's financial management system was in terrible shape. State had nothing like a financial planning system; did not really know where its resources were going and that even its financial operations had a lot of holes in them, although the Department had taken some strong actions to try to fix up the process.

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I thought I understood the personnel system, but it turned out to be more complex and less well managed than I had anticipated, although still within the framework that I had expected. On information systems, I knew that there had been terrible internecine warfare between the financial management offices and the information systems people. The information systems people and the communicators were quite different and didn't get along very well with other offices. In the foreign buildings area, I found pretty much what I expected. There had been some very clever short-term management, but no real long term plan or long term resource allocation plan. The security situation was pretty much what I expected: good management of an effort to move from a minimum security situation to a high security posture in a very brief period of time. There was some over-shooting of targets, but Bob Lamb had done an extraordinary job. I knew that there would be a lot of re-calibration that would have to be done, but that was not a major issue.

I had no understanding of consular affairs. I thought it was pretty mechanical; you would turn out so many passports and issue so many visas and that was it. In fact, it turned out that consular affairs is a very subtle set of processes. I had no understanding of what was involved in emergency evacuation and more generally what was required to support American citizens abroad. The refugee programs were much worse than I thought, but on the other hand, much easier to fix than I had expected once I got involved. We had some very good policy people who had never considered the issue of resources; once I had pointed that out, it was possible to make a lot progress in a very short period of time.

The one thing that was clear was that the higher echelons of the Department had not paid any serious attention to management. There had been so many festering issues that could have been settled had only some senior officials said that this was the way the issue would be settled and if someone didn't like, he or she could retire. There were a lot of difficult and subtle issues, but they were greatly outnumbered by the many easy issues that just required some discipline at some level. They could have been decided a long time ago and then the senior officials could have moved on to the next problem.

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Q: To what do you attribute this lack of interest in management at the top of the Department?

SELIN: I can sympathize with the situation, but can't explain it historically. The Department of State is the most extreme federal agency I have ever seen in one sense: it had always felt that policy could be made without regard to resources. It felt that policy was done on a grand level and that resources would somehow follow. If it had a little more money, it would live a little better; if there was less money, it would live a little less well. But the amount of resources would never affect its ability to conduct policy. That attitude created certain idiosyncrasies; the previous Secretary of State was very interested in personnel policies, but it was not because he felt that this would enable him to improve the conduct of foreign policy, but just because he empathized with people and tried to make the Department a more humane place to work. At least, that is my impression.

There was never any feeling at the Secretary or Deputy Secretary level of the Department that good management meant better foreign policy. Therefore it was viewed more as just a hobby or idiosyncrasy, as opposed to a matter of survival. It wasn't that the Secretary or his Deputy weren't interested in management topics, but from the evidence available, I guess that there was no comprehensive understanding of the significance of resource management for a rather small, but very complex Department. There seemed not to have been an understanding that if you didn't set resource priorities consistent with foreign policy objectives, that those objectives could not be achieved. So a number of very nasty issues were left festering.

There is a second guess I would make: management issues are not like policy issues. Policy issues require that the decision-maker listen to all views; he or she has to make an extra effort to elicit people's opinions. Those who are going to carry out the policy should be heard; it is therefore very important to build consensus and to communicate even if it takes a little longer. That is vitally important for the conduct of foreign policy. When it comes to resource management, the same process becomes an excuse for delay.

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In many cases, it doesn't make much difference what decision is made; the important point is to make a decision and then move on. The enormous committee structure and consultations are fine for policy making, but it leads to a structure in which management decisions are not made and even if once made, there is no structure to carry them out. Committees are fine for reviewing all aspects of policy, but in management you need to put some one in charge. There is always the tendency for an individual to avoid responsibility or at least not to confront a policy issue, which is fair because policy is everybody's decision, but in the execution of projects, someone has to be on the line. If the project turns out well, the manager has done well and should be rewarded; if it turns out badly, he or she have been a failure and should be punished. There was very little of that attitude in the Department.

Q: That management philosophy assumes that the Secretary and Deputy Secretary will give the Under Secretary for Management their full support. Was that your situation?

SELIN: As a start, I had unusual qualifications for this job in the combination of my business and management experiences and my personal knowledge of a number of elements of foreign policy. I assumed from the beginning that the Secretary did not want to spend a lot of time on management issues, but that he was making a significant investment because he knew that he was employing a person whom he felt was qualified for the position and one whose reputation was that he was not satisfied with half-way solutions. A person with such a background was bound to raise some difficulties and problems. I took it the job on willingly, making it quite clear to both the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary before accepting that I was interested in reform and in recasting the management processes and not just being at the helm of the ship for two or three years just to get it from here to there. They took me on knowing my goals. I haven't needed a lot of support from them, but when required, I have gotten it.

They are obviously driven by two inconsistent considerations: one, they want me to do a wonderful job and leave the place in much better shape than I found it; second, they don't

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want to invest too much time in knowing what I am doing. Their idea of supporting me is not to second-guess me and occasionally going to bat for me if necessary, but not being deeply involved. I was in effect employed to be “The Vice-Secretary for Management” to act on their behalf most of the time, although there were some inconsistencies in this philosophy.

Q: That is an interesting comment because a number of your predecessors are on record with statements that sometimes the substantive officers of the Foreign Service would “run around” them to the Secretary and get their management decisions over-ruled.

SELIN: That happened very rarely to me although there were occasions when I would have liked to be involved in the decision-making process, but didn't know that a particular issue was being reviewed. These issues were not ones that usually considered as “management issues”, but were policy issues that had a management content or were issues in my area which however were not management issues, such as refugee programs. The Refugee Bureau is as much a policy office as it is a management one; the reason why I was given the responsibility was because there were considerable amounts of money being spent on that program without a policy statement having been written that was consistent with available resources. So my stewardship was focused on guiding a program so that it stayed within available resources as well as improving its management.

In consular affairs, one would think that is a straight management function—how many people does it take to issue how many visas—but in fact, at the edges of the management issues, there are other questions. I am the manager of emergency evacuations and security for American personnel overseas, which becomes an integral part of the policy process. A lot of the decisions in these areas have to be made quickly. By statute, the Department's crisis manager is the Under Secretary for Political Affairs. Some decisions have been made which were more or less “political” decisions in which I would like to have been involved, either because they had an important management aspect or because they involved consular affairs or refugee programs. These instances were relatively few. The

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Secretary, the Deputy Secretary and especially the Under Secretary for Political Affairs have bent over backwards to get my views on issues which strictly speaking were not in my province and therefore not required. On management issues, they wanted to make sure that the policy input was considered, but the final judgement was mine.

Q: I would like to pursue the relationship of policy development to resource availabilities because this problem has been endemic in the Department. What were you able to do to bring these two processes together?

SELIN: One of my biggest disappointments is that, although I was reasonably effective in the management of the Department resources, I have had very little influence on the use of over-all foreign affairs resources, except as they might impinge on the management of the State Department. I have had a fair amount of influence on the integration of programs overseas and therefore on non-State resources used overseas. We did that through the enhancement of Ambassadorial authority and my insistence that Embassies be viewed as single units, but here in Washington, the Department does not have the same authority that a Chief of Mission has overseas. So on major foreign policy resource issues, if they did not involve the Department's own resources, I have little influence and that has been my biggest disappointment.

Concerning the Department's own resources, the Deputy Secretary is the resource manager of the "International Affairs" budget account. He has become an absolute zealot about not approving programs—assistance, public information, etc.—unless the resources were available, in State or in another agency. The needed resources had to be available somewhere. I can't take full credit for this approach; the budget exigencies have done a lot to force this approach. My chief financial officer and myself have been able to create an environment in which the information about resource availability is made available to the decision-maker. We have forced overseas budget decisions to be tied to programs; we were not satisfied with the old approach of cutting a person here or there. We looked at budget questions programmatically, determining the program consequences of resource

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reductions. We have established a budget process that may not be tied to policy, but is tied to programs. In other words, the budget may not be tied to the rejuvenation of Eastern Europe. but is tied to the ability to conduct a private sector assistance program in Poland. We have made sure that people's attention has been drawn to the fact that it takes resources to operate programs of that kind and that they be reviewed from that aspect before the normal personnel and overseas operations decisions were looked at.

Q: Did you run into much resistance from the Foreign Service to your concept of linking policy and resources?

SELIN: No. My view is, at least at the conceptual level, the Foreign Service was just waiting for someone to come in to manage the resources, including the personnel system of the Foreign Service itself. The enormous uncertainties, the roller coaster with the many lean years, the continuing indecision which moved personnel policies back and forth, made the Service very discontented. Having said that, I must admit that a lot of the habits of the Foreign Service are inimical to the kind of management that I viewed as required. When faced with the costs of this kind of management, maybe some of its enthusiasm may have waned.

For example, the entire Foreign Service performance and evaluation system is based on individual performance. The officer with the best performance is promoted. I tried very hard, with only moderate success, to try to recognize units—the best Embassy, the most successful political section, etc.—as opposed to individual solo performances. That is not in the culture of the Foreign Service; it is not truly a Service; there is no “rushing in” to take over someone else's position in case of need. The Service consists of people much more oriented to a strict division of labor with each person knowing what he or she is doing, trying to do the best job possible. The Service's willingness to accept such things as unpleasant living environments is very positive; there isn't much whining about issues of that kind; on the contrary there are many more examples of people willing to do what is asked of them and only subsequently negotiating for better positions and

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conditions. But the whole culture of the Foreign Service is oriented toward individual, not team, recognition. If you can generalize about a group consisting of about 4,900 generalists and 3,300 specialists, you would have to say that the Service accepts the idea that discipline is a “good thing”, that management is a “good thing”, leadership is a “good thing” and that State Department could be a lot more effective and efficient with more of these “good things”. But on a day-to-day basis, the exercise of the “good things” might well arouse some hesitation among Foreign Service individuals who might wonder whether the perceived sacrifice that they might be called upon to make is really necessary.

In summary, I think that the Foreign Service has been desperate for strong leadership as long as it is participatory leadership, which provides the Foreign Service, individually and collectively, an opportunity to participate in some of the major decisions.

Q: Let me divert for a moment to the macromanagement question of the international activities. Are you satisfied that the U.S. Government as a whole has a reasonably good idea of what the role the Department of State is supposed to play?

SELIN: I don't think so. There is one view with which I have no sympathy at all which proposed that the State Department be to foreign affairs what the Justice Department is to legal matters. That is to say, that regardless of the issue, all representation, all negotiations, all diplomacy with other nations should be conducted by State Department officials. The idea that a very complicated environmental treaty or a very complicated trade agreement should be negotiated exclusively by the State Department is ridiculous. To be sure, the Department has a role to play. It should provide the policy consistency and the bulk of the overseas services, —e.g. administrative support, security, American citizens services—which are most efficiently provided by a monopoly instead of separate agencies.

But the content of negotiations, of diplomacy and of reporting has become so specialized and so technical, that the foreign affairs core functions—State, AID, USIA, CIA, the Agriculture Service—are now left to form the “warp and woof” of the fabric of overseas

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operations—that is the framework and the continuity of overseas service. A number of professional services with overseas representation—which may or may not have a continuing body of experts who serve overseas—have grown in the last fifteen years. The Foreign Agriculture Service does have a professional corps which spends most of its career overseas; the Foreign Commercial Service does not—they are in and out. A lot of other parts of Agriculture, or the Defense Department, or EPA, for example, have not established professional overseas organizations. These institutions believe that people can do one or two tours overseas and then return to driving tanks or doing environmental analysis in the U.S. I don't think that is very effective. Whereas the State Department doesn't and shouldn't have a monopoly on negotiating and reporting, those organizations that should participate, need to make a greater investment in having a professional overseas service which would permit them to have more qualified to handle their overseas operations. I refer here to such skills as languages, an understanding of what an Embassy is, culture knowledge, etc.

Q: Does that thought suggest that you would like to the Foreign Service Act applied to all personnel assigned overseas?

SELIN: If I really had my choice, I would prefer to see two things: first) a major reorganization of the foreign affairs agencies—something comparable to the Defense Department reorganization of 1958—which would replace State Department with a Department of Foreign Affairs which would encompass the present State Department, AID, USIA, ACDA and probably the Foreign Commercial Service. I would exclude the Foreign Agriculture Service, which would make the plan somewhat inconsistent, but the Department of Foreign Affairs would have no relative advantage to offer FAS. The organizations in the new Department of Foreign Affairs would be under the line control of the Secretary of State, much as the military departments, the unified commands and the specified commands are under the Secretary of Defense.

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My second objective would be the establishment of a single Foreign Service so that whenever an individual was assigned to an overseas position, he or she would be seconded to that Service and not any longer be the employee of the agency that he or she just left. That agency would reimburse the Service for the cost of the employee; there would be a single set of benefits applicable to all American personnel assigned overseas; there would be single set of training programs. Most of the officers would be seconded for more than one assignment so that those going overseas would be subject to the overseas training policy, etc. This would certainly be applicable all of the "main-line" agencies; that is, those that have more than a handful of personnel overseas. The unified approach would not apply to, for example, a Naval Medical Research unit which might be engaged in research on tropical medicine, which may have to be done in Panama or Indonesia, but are clearly not part of a global system. I would distinguish between people who carrying out technical activities which may be primarily extension of domestic programs, but happen to incidentally take place overseas and those which are an integral part of the U.S. Government overseas programs. In the latter group, I would include the personnel of the Federal Aviation Agency, the Department of Transportation and the Justice Department. They are serving in overseas assignments and are part of the U.S. Government overseas programs. They are under de facto or de jure authority of an Ambassador and should be treated in terms of status and compensation like a Foreign Service employee.

Q: What do you see the foreign policy consequences being of our present disparate personnel systems?

SELIN: The fact is that the Ambassador is held responsible for all activities at his or her post. We have taken steps which to any rational person might look rather trivial, but having been on the firing line for a couple of years, are to me rather consequential. They were all intended to enhance the Ambassador's authority. I believe that on a day-to-day operational basis and in the policy determination area, an Embassy's problems are relatively minor. The more acute problems are related to inefficiencies. Resources are so tight that we

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really can't afford to have Minister-Counselors for three-four persons organizations. We can't afford to have separate agricultural or commercial sections or in some cases even political sections in smaller Embassies. Those instances are a deplorable waste of resources. Given that funds are so scarce, we could utilize the scarce resources in better ways than in the overhead costs that these small sections incur. Having said all that, I don't think that a case can be made that these small sections undermine each other; it is just that we could have more people assigned abroad if we didn't have to support some of unnecessary overhead costs which are devoted to independent organizations, with the resulting consequences of over-ranked officers with representational housing and other expenses. These situations arise from the attitudes of their Washington parent organizations.

Q: What impact has modern technology—e.g. communications—had on the way the Department conducts its operations?

SELIN: Of all the new technologies, communications is probably the one that the Department has absorbed the best.

Q: What effect has the print and the visual media, with its greatly improved communication systems, had on the conduct of, foreign affairs?

SELIN: I don't think that either State or CIA has caught up to that new phenomenon. Clearly, the Department does much too much political reporting. We have political reporting requirements that must have been set twenty or thirty years ago. These reports permit INR and others to write an analysis of how a particular party in Country X will do in the next election. I don't think that either the field report or the Washington analysis adds much to policy development and furthermore, much of the information sent by the field is probably already available from good journalists. It is pretty clear that the Department's reporting is not really focused on what is not available from the press or other sources which are already available to Washington offices. It should be

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concentrating on information not available which will supplement media reports. CIA is worse; overt information should only be collected to fill informational holes not available from non-governmental sources. At the same time, I am not very sympathetic to the criticism that we only deal with the elites and don't take “the pulse” of the common people. It is probably much too much the other way; we deal with all kinds of people who have little influence—people with whom contacts are just not worth the effort.

In general, I don't think that the U.S. Government's reporting has caught up with the major expansion of information now available from other sources such as the media.

Q: During some of my interviews, I have encountered a confusion between “management” and “administration”, particularly among Foreign Service officers. Have you had to face that problem?

SELIN: Not really. In my definition, administration is a matter of taking the tools you are given and operate with them as efficiently as you can. Management is basically a matter of asking: “What are we trying to do and what tools are required to accomplish it?”. If you don't have the necessary tools, then you construct new ones.

The Foreign Service has understood this difference. I have done as much as I can to broadcast the difference and I think that has had some effect. In my view, the Under Secretary for Management doesn't have to be a Foreign Service administrative officer. There are of course administrative tools that we work with, but we work with people, with leadership, with project management, with trying to bring the tools to support the policy. Management means leading organizations and concern for people.

I think the Foreign Service is beginning to understand that. The understanding is increasing rapidly because you can't become an Ambassador until you know how to manage. Of course, if you look at some of the choices that have been made, we made not

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have been completely consistent with that policy, but we try. We are certainly trying harder than was the case in the past.

Q: Does the fact that the Department has to manage two disparate personnel systems inhibit efficiency?

SELIN: We have four separate personnel systems. I find the problems between specialists and generalists more taxing and much more troublesome than managing different personnel systems. I have had a very simple idea of what the Foreign Service is: it is a Service for people who serve overseas. The jobs the Foreign Service fills in Washington should be chosen essentially to make the Foreign Service officer more effective when he or she is serving abroad. I don't really care whether we have two or twenty Assistant Secretaries or other senior positions who are Foreign Service officers. There are a lot of Foreign Service officers who can make major contributions in a Washington position; there are a lot Civil Service officers who can do the same. The key objective must be to keep the Foreign Service officer overseas most of the time because that is why they joined the Foreign Service in the first place. We have invested a lot of resources to train those officers for overseas service and that gives them a relative advantage. They can have a role in formulating foreign policy and in pushing paper in Washington, but they do not have a unique advantage over Civil Service officers in those roles. If you accept that point of view, then a lot of the conflict between the Foreign and Civil Services disappear. We have been insistent to the point of being absolute fanatics that an officer not spend more than five consecutive years in Washington—preferably fewer—and that he or she spend at least two-thirds of their career overseas. We started recasting the diplomatic security service to insure that its members spend more time overseas and less in Washington.

Q: One final question. You raised the subject of generalist versus specialist. Could you expand on your views on this subject?

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SELIN: The problem is that the Department has never had a personnel policy for specialists. It has never defined what a specialist is—is it a secretary or a physician or something else. We haven't made much progress on this question. We started to try to define those issues that are essentially “guild” issues which apply to all specialists and those issues that apply specifically to one specialty or another. Every specialty, including secretaries—which is probably the most populous specialty—did not have a decent job ladder, didn't have any kind of consistent training concept. We haven't made much progress, as I said earlier, but we have extended job ladders by introducing more consistent rules for advancement. We have made some progress in identifying what training is required. We have not done as well in identifying those traits which are common to all specialties as compared to determining what specialties the Department needs and how to make each of them useful.

There is a lot to be learned from the military system in this regard; it has commissioned and non-commissioned personnel and also warrant officers, who are a kind of commissioned specialist. A warrant officer is a high ranking specialist who however is not being trained to assume generalist responsibilities. A warrant officer carries out his or her duties at a very high level of proficiency with high compensation, but does not generate inefficiencies by being placed in a training program designed to prepare an employee for unpredictable assignments. Commissioned officers are essentially generalists who have specializations; they are all being trained to be general officers. It is true that some know more about armor, some about engineering, some about artillery, but they still need to know about combined arms strategies and tactics. The Department has done too little of that; the military is less specialized than the Department of State. The military, if it wants someone to fly helicopters for twenty years, employs a warrant officer and not a pilot. Pilots do a lot of other things; they have to be prepared to run the Air Force and not just fly.

Q: At this point. I would like to thank you very much for giving us time for this very interesting interview. Many thanks.

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End of interview